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Miles Williams

Denison University

Paul Djupe

Denison University

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Are Denisonians in a Political Bubble

Paul A. Djupe

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By Miles D. Williams and Paul A. Djupe – WE ARE DPR

College students often get knocked for being out of touch, isolated on their pretty campuses inside a political bubble only talking with people who agree with them. Some students claim to be in a bubble themselves and that it needs to be popped. From our experiences interacting with Denisonians on a campus that is demonstrably trending toward fewer and fewer Republicans, we don't find this to be the case in at least one respect. Denisonians appear to be more or less wise about the state of the world. So which is it? Are students in a political bubble clueless about how the world actually is or do they have a reasonable sense of what it's like out there?

One way to answer this question is to assess whether students are aware of how Americans think about politics. Specifically, the 127 survey in October 2022 asked about 500 student respondents what percentage of Americans would favor four different public policies. These are statements used on the 2020 Cooperative Election Study, which polled about 60,000 Americans around the time of the election. The percentage of that sample agreeing with the statement is given in parentheses.

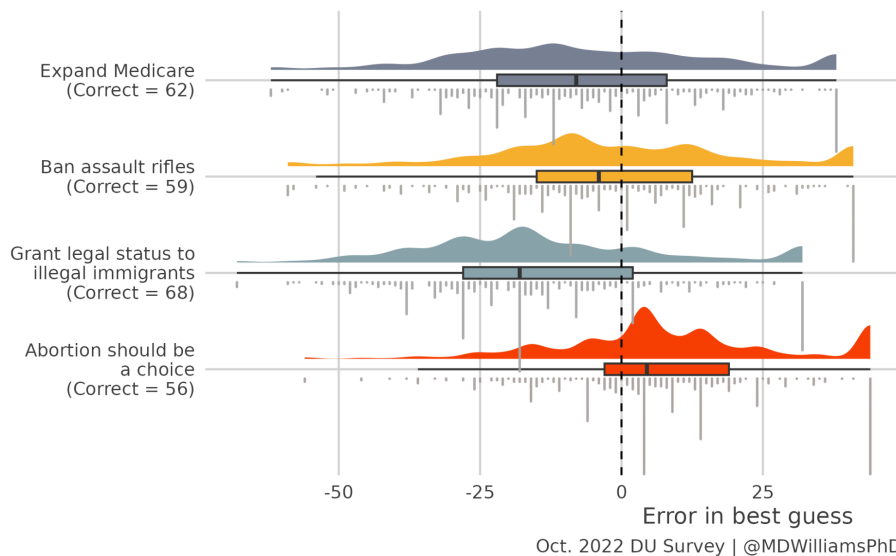
- Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice (56% agreed)
- Grant legal status to all illegal immigrants who have held jobs and paid taxes for at least 3 years, and not been convicted of any felony crimes (68% agreed)
- Ban assault rifles (59% agreed)
- Expand Medicare to a single comprehensive public health care coverage program that would cover all Americans (62% agreed)

There are lots of other ways of capturing the 'cluefulness' of students, including traditional political knowledge questions like which party controls the Senate, who the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is, etc. But knowledge of public opinion is important in and of itself as a source of "impersonal influence" as Diana Mutz put it. People can use public opinion (whether as stats on the news or likes on social media) as cues to shape their own opinions. But, also, fundamentally misperceiving public opinion as supportive of your opinions not only demonstrates insulation from diverse views, but can contribute to a sense of moral absolutism that will not be conducive to compromise and public debate. Misperceiving greater opposition can also undermine the sense of efficacy that you can make change in the world. So, it's better to be right.

So, how did Denisonians do? The ‘raincloud plot’ in Figure 1 shows the results translated to show the error rate. If students on average are correct in their perceptions, then the peak of the ridge and the dark solid median line of the boxplot will line up with the dotted line (zero error). If they are shifted to the left that means students underestimate support; if it’s to the right, then they overestimate support. Students were pretty close! They underestimated support for expanding Medicare (not surprising, since it’s a program for older Americans), slightly underestimated support for an assault rifle ban (only by 5 points), just about nailed support for abortion (slightly overestimated support by ~ 5 percent), and way underestimated support for granting legal status to immigrants by 20 points.

Figure 1

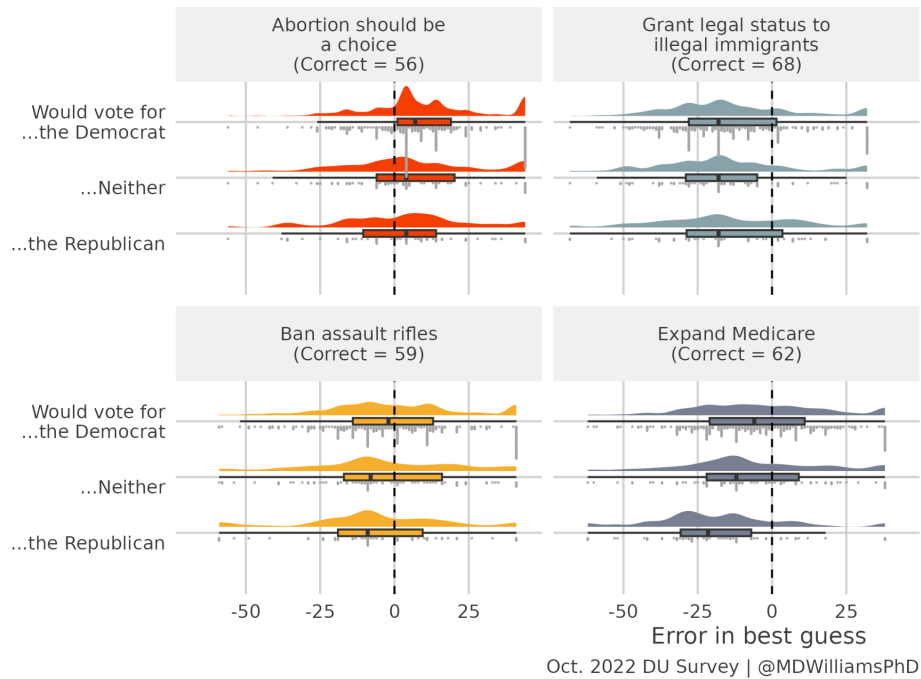
How accurate are DU student guesses about national attitudes?



We wanted to see if a ‘double bubble’ was in effect. That is, every political observer talks about the insulation of partisans who have created by choice their own social and mediated realities. Is there any evidence for that? Figure 2 kinda sorta provides some evidence for this. Democrats are much closer to guessing correctly on Medicare expansion and banning assault weapons than Independents and Republicans. But Republicans are closer to correct on abortion and everyone is wrong about immigration. None of these gaps are very large, which gives little substantiation to the partisan polarization story.

Figure 2

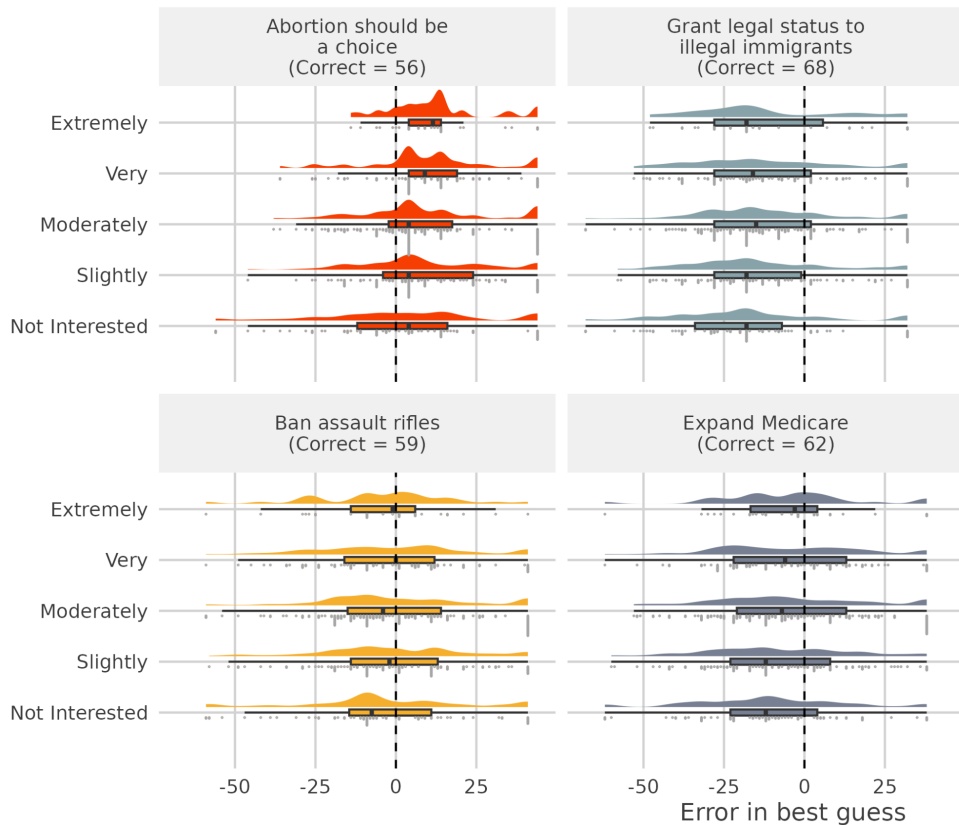
How accurate are DU student guesses about national attitudes by voting behavior?



Correct perception just has to be a function of how much we are paying attention. So, those who are most interested in politics are going to get these questions right. Right? That's definitely true about assault weapons and Medicare expansion, but it plays no role for immigration opinion and it works in reverse on abortion – the most interested are the furthest from the truth. Interest, of course, doesn't mean you're paying attention to reputable sources.

Figure 3

How accurate are DU student guesses about national attitudes by interest in politics?

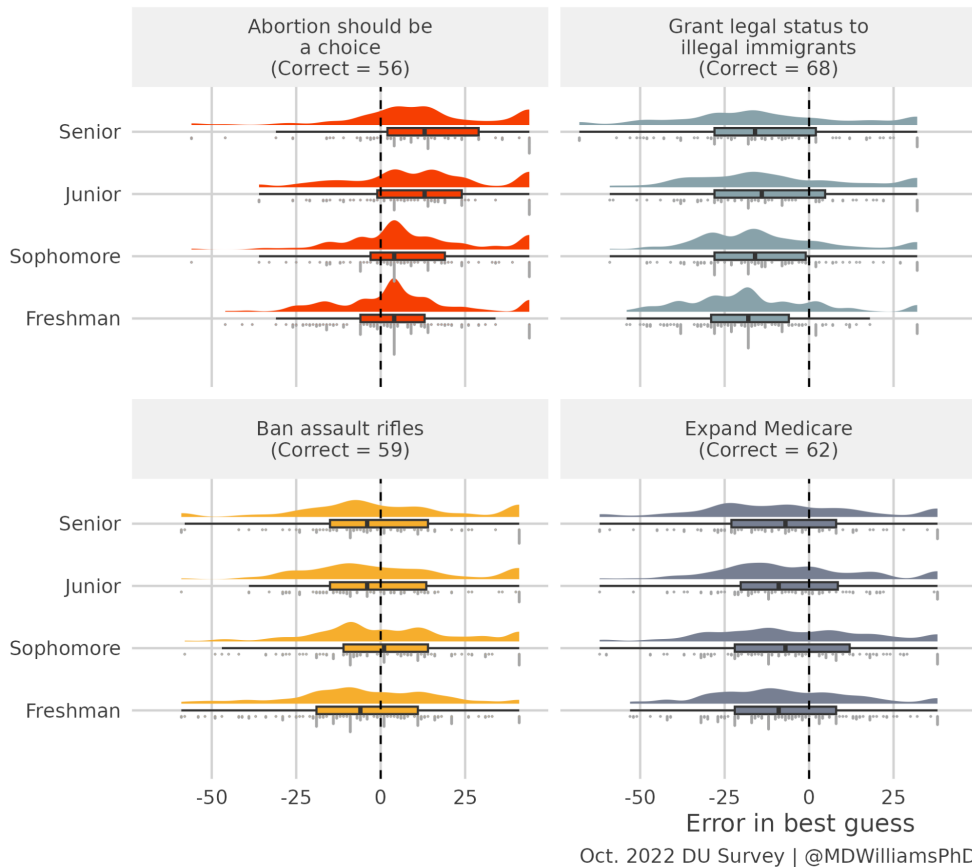


Oct. 2022 DU Survey | @MDWilliamsPhD

OK, one more. What about the effect of a Denison education? Are seniors more clue-full than freshmen? Or does the bubble manifest across four years to divorce you from reality? Seniors are closer to opinion reality on Medicare expansion, which makes sense – they are getting older, after all. Otherwise, class year doesn't seem to make a difference. The exception, again, is abortion where seniors are the furthest from the mark. We don't think it's surprising to see no pattern here. While we want students to be aware of the world, this is only a narrow slice of the very many things to know.

Figure 4

How accurate are DU student guesses about national attitudes by graduating class?



There's not much evidence here that Denisonians live in a political bubble in at least one sense – they have a pretty good idea, on average, of what Americans think about some hot-button public policies. That signals awareness and good information flow, which pokes a hole in the idea that social ties dictate what you know of the world, even if they may have an influence. So it's still important to grab a coffee with someone who has a different worldview from you.

Miles D. Williams (DrDr) is an amateur weightlifter and metal guitarist who teaches courses for [Data for Political Research](#). He tries to be on [Twitter](#), but could do better.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who runs the Data for Political Research minor. He started [onetwentyseven.blog](#) a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on [Twitter](#) and you should be too, along with your president.